

VZCZCXYZ0000  
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHGT #1352/01 3041840  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
R 301840Z OCT 08  
FM AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6348  
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE  
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO 4989

C O N F I D E N T I A L GUATEMALA 001352

SIPDIS

DEPT PASS TO USAID FOR LAC/CAM EBOSTIK

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2018  
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [SNAR](#) [EAID](#) [GT](#)  
SUBJECT: GUATEMALA'S INDIGENOUS POPULATION STRUGGLES FOR  
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

REF: A. GUATEMALA 387  
[1](#)B. GUATEMALA 867

Classified By: P/E Officer Mordica Simpson for reasons 1.4 (b&d).

#### Summary

-----  
[1](#)1. (C) With 22 Mayan indigenous groups, it is unlikely that Guatemala's splintered indigenous population will unite in the short term around the idea of a common ethnic identity, as was possible in Bolivia. Supporters of the political movement Winaq believe that only an indigenous political party could effectively influence Guatemala's political future around policies of interest to the indigenous population. However, others believe that Guatemala's indigenous should seek to influence the country's political future through participation in established parties. While Guatemala's indigenous population appears to have increased its political participation in recent years, this participation has not resulted in greater influence in the national political party structure. Land conflict attracts a great deal of attention in the Guatemalan media, but civil society and government leaders believe that the indigenous population is more likely to unite around issues such as social inclusion, education and health care, and will support political parties that can most effectively address those issues. End Summary.

#### One Party, One Identity?

-----  
[1](#)2. (SBU) Poloffs met with indigenous leaders, NGO representatives, and government officials in Guatemala City and in the department of Alta Verapaz to discuss the participation of Guatemala's indigenous communities in the national political process. Congresswoman Otilia Lux de Coti, formerly a member of the Encounter for Guatemala (EG) party and now an independent, argued that the indigenous population will impact the political process through participation in a political party created for and led by indigenous representatives, such as Winaq ("people" in several Mayan languages). Indigenous leader Rigoberta Menchu created the political movement Winaq in 2007, during her presidential bid, to promote the rights of the country's indigenous peoples. Winaq has begun the process to legally incorporate itself as an indigenous political party and plans to complete the process prior to the 2011 elections.

[1](#)3. (C) Congresswoman de Coti believes that Winaq's participation in the 2007 presidential elections made political parties realize the need to have increased indigenous representation in their own ranks. As a result, according to de Coti, there are now an unprecedented 20 indigenous representatives in Congress. (Note: 20 may be an accurate count, but due to questions of self-identification, determining a precise number is difficult. End Note.) Winaq has not taken hold in Alta Verapaz, however. According to

political analyst Alvaro Pop of Naleb', an indigenous rights organization, the indigenous population in Guatemala, unlike Bolivia, will not successfully influence the political arena by uniting under the banner of one indigenous party.

14. (C) A potential obstacle in organizing Guatemala's indigenous population under one party is the difficulty in constructing a single indigenous identity, according to Pop. The indigenous population speaks 20 different languages, and there are 22 ethnic groups within the Mayan population. Aurelia Tot, representative of the Secretariat of Food and Nutritional Security (SESAN) in Alta Verapaz, explained that some individuals, who no longer wear typical dress or who have improved their economic standing, do not identify themselves as indigenous, further illustrating the fluidity of an indigenous identity. Congresswoman Elza Cu of the ruling National Unity of Hope (UNE) party underlined Winaq's poor performance in the 2007 elections, even though Rigoberta Menchu was a well-known candidate, as proof that indigenous groups will not support candidates based solely on the idea of a common ethnic identity. Pop, along with other indigenous and government leaders, believe that the indigenous population could most effectively influence Guatemala's political future by participating in the power structures of established parties.

#### Influence Through Political Parties and the Government

15. (SBU) According to Pop, there has been greater political participation among indigenous groups in the last 15 years than in the previous 200 due to the advent of democracy, greater civic knowledge, and the ability of political parties to buy votes. Pop highlighted a 119 percent increase in 2006

for requests for voter cards in rural areas, where most of the indigenous population resides. USAID assistance in opening 681 new rural polling stations benefited up to one million mostly indigenous Guatemalans in the 2007 general elections. As a result, there was an estimated 15 percent increase in voter turnout in rural areas over the 2003 elections. While there is indigenous representation in all political parties, some NGO and government representatives question whether such representation has resulted in greater influence in the national political party structure. According to Raxche' Rodriguez, representative to the National Peace Accords Council, individuals of mixed European and indigenous ancestry (Ladinos) continue to control the national political party structure, leaving little room for real influence by the indigenous minority.

16. (C) In Alta Verapaz, where approximately 95 percent of the more than 1 million inhabitants belong to the Kekchi Mayan ethnic group, indigenous communities are "voting," but not "choosing" their political leaders, according to Governor Gloria Tecun. Governor Tecun explained that political parties buy votes. Jorge Coy of "Pastoral Social," the social branch of the Catholic Church, agreed. According to Coy, some indigenous voters accept free gifts from political parties, and let that determine their vote.

17. (C) Some leaders highlighted the increasing numbers of indigenous government representatives as indication of increased political participation. According to Rodriguez, 132 of the country's current 332 mayors are indigenous, compared to zero indigenous mayors in 1960, and there are currently seven indigenous governors (out of 22). (Note: According to the Guatemalan Association of Indigenous Mayors, there are currently 113 indigenous mayors in Guatemala. This discrepancy highlights issues of self-identification that make a precise count difficult. End Note.) According to Borys Chinchilla, National Director of the international NGO MercyCorps, while there has been an increase in the number of indigenous government representatives in the last ten years, these representatives have not been placed in key decision-making positions. Minister of Culture Jeronimo Lancerio is the only indigenous cabinet-level representative, and Congresswoman Cu expressed disappointment that there are

not more indigenous cabinet members in the Colom Administration. Colom was the first President elected overwhelmingly by the rural (indigenous) vote and promised that his government "would have an indigenous face."

#### Participation at the Local Level

-----

¶18. (SBU) According to some NGO and government representatives, indigenous community organizations have limited influence in the national political arena, but these organizations may play an important role in increasing the visibility of historically marginalized indigenous populations, raising their civic consciousness, and enhancing their understanding of the political process. According to Pop, indigenous political participation is strongest at the local level through Community Development Councils (COCODES).

¶19. (SBU) COCODES, created by the Portillo Administration in 2002, are comprised of a ten-member executive board elected by the community, and are responsible for raising the community's needs and concerns with the mayor. According to Mayor Julian Fernando Lemus (of the governing UNE party) of QMayor Julian Fernando Lemus (of the governing UNE party) of Tucuru, Alta Verapaz, the Councils determine a community's priorities since the mayor cannot unilaterally decide to support a project such as constructing a road or building a school without buy-in from the COCODE. COCODE representative Julieta Cruz Paz of Tucuru stated that indigenous communities have more political influence than they did ten years ago through their participation in these Councils.

¶10. (C) According to Coy of "Pastoral Social," locally elected COCODES representatives may strengthen indigenous communities' currently weak civic foundation. However, some NGO representatives question whether these elections are truly democratic, and Coy indicated that in some instances mayors unilaterally chose the executive board. Even if COCODES function at the community level, MercyCorps' Chinchilla argued that the idea that COCODES influence the political power structure is overstated. Coy agreed, asserting that the non-indigenous elite continue to have a major role in determining a community's priorities.

#### Land as a Unifying Issue

-----

¶11. (C) Although Alta Verapaz is the site of a large number of Guatemala's land conflicts, NGO and government

representatives disagree on the importance of land as the issue that could unite the indigenous population. According to Edgar Euler, Manager of the Land Program for MercyCorps, individuals who conduct land invasions usually view land as either an ancestral right, essential for survival, or as a business, and invade land based on those justifications. Euler stated that most land invaders, the majority of whom are indigenous, view themselves as the legitimate owners of land stolen from them by Spanish conquerors. For others, land cultivation is the only means of economic survival in a country where, according to Euler, educational opportunities and the possibility of non-agricultural employment are scarce for indigenous farmers. According to Congresswoman Cu and Governor Tecun, small opportunistic groups lead the land conflict movement in Alta Verapaz, and these groups leverage the land issue for business deals. Tot of SESAN asserted that groups such as the National Coordination of Indigenous Peoples and Campesinos (CONIC) instigate indigenous groups to conduct land invasions while CONIC's leaders keep the best parcels of land for themselves, or sell government-provided land to private individuals and invade other parcels.

¶12. (SBU) Land invasions attract a great deal of attention in the Guatemalan media and affect productivity, according to Tot and AmCit Roger Perez Ardebol, a large landowner in Alta Verapaz. Tot explained that land conflicts decrease food productivity, making it more difficult for already impoverished individuals to subsist. Land invaders took control of the majority of AmCit Perez Ardebol's cultivated land more than a year ago and he no longer feels safe living

on his plantation due to threats. According to Perez Ardebol, land invaders destroyed his coffee plants and the result is that his plantation is no longer a functioning business.

¶13. (SBU) As part of the Peace Accords, the GOG, armed opposition, and civil society negotiated a solution to the country's land conflict that resulted in the creation of the Land Fund (Fondo de Tierras). The Land Fund promised to address the country's unequal land distribution and to give small, mostly indigenous, farmers greater access to land. In Alta Verapaz, for example, the government purchased land from private owners and provided that land to small farmers through a loan program that grants a three-year grace period for repayment. In 2007, the GOG purchased the New Hope farm for \$400,000 through the Land Fund and provided that land to Alejandro Teyul Coy and the local Federation for the Development of the Municipality of Tucuru, of which he is a member. According to Teyul, New Hope farm had been abandoned for 13 years and he and his federation fought for ownership since 1999. The group has until 2010 to begin repaying its loan with proceeds from coffee and rubber cultivation. The program is not without problems, however, according to Euler of MercyCorps. Euler explained that land owners often sell the government land at an inflated price and the result is that small farmers must repay a loan for overvalued land.

¶14. (C) Although land ownership is an important issue in Guatemala, Rodriguez of the National Peace Accords Council, Congresswoman de Coti, Congresswoman Cu, Jorge Coy of "Pastoral Social," and Governor Tecun agreed that lack of access to education and health care, and poor infrastructure are the most important issues affecting indigenous communities. Teyul also cited better access to education for his children as the issue that most concerned him. According to Congresswoman Cu, it is more likely that the indigenous population will seek to exert influence on existing political parties on issues such as education and health care rather than land conflicts. Cu stated that there is greater consensus among the indigenous population that access to education and health care is the most effective way for them to improve their lives. While land invasions attract attention nationally and internationally, Cu does not believe that Guatemala's diverse indigenous population will unite around this issue, which she believes is mostly led by opportunistic groups.

¶15. (C) Guatemala's indigenous population is also negatively affected by two issues that preoccupy the citizenry: a potential decrease in remittances from the U.S. as the economy slows and Guatemala's worsening internal security. According to Pop, more than fifty percent of Guatemalans living in the U.S. are indigenous, based on studies of remittance flows conducted by Banrural. According to the International Organization for Migration's program officer, Victor Lozano, 56.3 percent of the recipients of remittances live in rural areas, where the majority of indigenous people live, and 35 percent of Guatemalans who send remittances were from departments with poverty rates above 71 percent, such as

Alta Verapaz. A slowdown in remittance flows could therefore have a disproportionately negative effect on indigenous communities. Guatemalans are also increasingly concerned about the encroachment of Mexican narcotrafficking groups on Guatemalan territory (Ref A). The presence of these groups in Guatemalan departments bordering Mexico, which have a large indigenous population, has increased in the recent past. Confrontations such as a September 2 gun battle in Coban, Alta Verapaz, reportedly involving Mexican narcotraffickers, illustrates Governor Tecun's point that violence has increased in Alta Verapaz, which she considers a "bridge" for drugs transiting Guatemala en route to Mexico. (Note: Per DEA, Mexican Zetas, the armed wing of the Gulf Cartel, have established a permanent presence in Alta Verapaz. End Note.)

Comment

-----

¶16. (C) In contrast to the Bolivian case, it is unlikely that Guatemala's splintered indigenous population will unite around one leader or a common ethnic identity in the near term. President Colom told us that his venerable indigenous spiritual guide ("ajq'ji") once said that "no indigenous person would ever be president of Guatemala" due to the deep rifts among the country's 22 Mayan indigenous groups (Ref B).

Instead, in its struggle for greater political participation, Guatemala's indigenous population will likely push to exert influence in established party structures, focusing on issues such as social inclusion, education, health care, and infrastructure.

McFarland